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## Analytical Paper #1: The Plot Against America

## *Response to Question 2*

Phillip Roth's *The Plot Against America* presents a counterfactual where the institution of American government turns against an ethnic group – the Jewry in America. Drawing a contrast to Nazi Germany, Fiorello La Guardia remarks, “It can’t happen here? My friends, it *is* happening here...” (Roth, p. 305) Can a government-sponsored oppression and endorsement of violence against a minority group pervade America today? I say no: we need not fear systematic government repression against any particular group in America. The values of the American people, the economic prosperity and resources we are blessed with, and the path dependency of our federal institutions preclude this from happening under purely political circumstances. But a general stigmatization and repudiation of a segment of society is happening right now - against a group you may not expect.

Three turning points lead to La Guardia's “it”: the trip to Washington DC, Homestead 42, and the dramatic ending. The first manifests during the Roths' trip to Washington, where they encounter two instances of blatant anti-Semitism: the altercation at the cafeteria and their ejection from the hotel. Still reeling from their experience at the Lincoln Memorial, the Roths find themselves turned out by the hotel management, condoned by the local law enforcement. Roth makes it clear how the situation was beyond plausible deniability, seen from the officer's unequivocal statement – “But that doesn't mean all hotel reservations are created equal.” (Roth, p. 70)

We have gone a long distance from the era Roth sets his novel in. Today, one could hardly imagine this happening without consequences. Decades of case law and anecdotal experience make the outcome abundantly clear: blatant racial discrimination will be met with legal action and economic and political stigmatization from the rest of society. Indeed, Roth's portrayal of this

circumstance could only be achieved in that historical era, containing a wrong more sordid and ingrained in society. Consider an African American family visiting the Lincoln memorial in 1942 and reading the inscription at the base: are these the words which guarantee equality for all? Rabbi Bengelsdorf notes that “the Jews of America can participate fully in the national life of their country.” (Roth, p. 106) But the national sentiment at that time clearly demonstrated otherwise – that was the era of segregation and discrimination.

The second turning point is the establishment of Homestead 42 - the mass relocation of American Jews to rural America. Could such an insidious program be put in place today? No, because of a basic concept known as path dependency. In essence, major structural choices that we have made as a society cannot be unmade. Through the precedents set by history, the American system has specific protections ingrained into the national psyche – no government or private organization can discriminate based on race. No “bad” president or administration can upturn this system. Depending on where one sits politically, Jackson, Johnson, Taft, Harding, Coolidge, FDR, Reagan – any or all were “bad” presidents in some way. But the mistakes we have made in the past have led to specific constraints on power, through the Constitution and our courts; the system is stronger than any one man. Roth dryly notes a weaker form himself: “Lindbergh dared to justify himself... that guarantees embedded in the U.S. Constitution, combined with long-standing American democratic traditions, made it impossible for a final solution to the Jewish problem to be executed as rapidly or efficiently.” (Roth, p. 324)

While the federal government will never be able to conduct the actions described by Roth’s novel, that does not mean that non-governmental actors will not advocate for stigmatization and discrimination. Narrow La Guardia’s “it” to mean ostracizing a segment of the population as an

“other” and turning the cogs of society against them. Can it happen here, in 2019? I say yes. It’s happening right now.

Every day, we are besieged by journalists and pundits who fearmonger on the rise of fascism in the United States. These figures compare our politicians and institutions to those of Nazi Germany. People are looking for fascists and neo-Nazis under every rock, taking a group with zero social, economic and political power and turning them into a national menace.

Consider the main target of these comparisons: a duly elected president. ““Winchell is a Jew,’ the man announced, ‘in the pay of the British government.’” (Roth, p. 78) It was not long ago that there were those eagerly anticipating the following: “Donald Trump is a plant,” the pundit announced, “in the pay of the Russians.” If we take the Roths’ experience in DC, and replace “Thank goodness we have President Lindbergh” to “Thank goodness we have President Trump”, who would receive the looks of condescension and threats? *The Plot Against America* is set in a time when the government-sponsored repression of Jews in Nazi Germany was fueled by a select elite that demonized a segment of society. Yes, these statements made today are directed at the people in “power” – but those elected today may not be tomorrow.

The plot’s crisis manifests in the form of riots and a coup. “[Burton K. Wheeler] has deemed it in the country’s best interest to assume the duties of acting president in accordance with Article II, Section 1 of the U.S. Constitution... by the time Americans awaken to begin their day, martial law has been imposed throughout the continental United States.” (Roth, p. 308) To reach that crisis today, the catalyst must be an unprecedented economic collapse. The American system, as it is currently constituted, can stand political fragmentation short of economic upheaval, for economic hardship is what drives people to fringe political choices. The primary historical example is Germany, post-WW1: socially, politically, economically and culturally devastated.

(Lepsius, p. 59) Hitler's rise to power was preceded by a decadelong struggle among the working class and perceived by many as the last hope for German economic revitalization.

Prosperity leaves no room for radicalization. With widespread economic prosperity, there is little incentive to find a scapegoat in any identity, race, or creed. That is the rationale behind Bengelsdorf's statement: "the political objectives of my people are identical with his." (Roth, p. 35) As long as American economic prosperity persists, we have no reason to fear "it".

#### *Response to Question 4*

The world is a cold, apathetic place. That was Alvin's realization.

Philip's cousin starts off as a firebrand – “The worst human being ever born is Hitler, and frankly I'd rather be fighting that son of a \*\*\*\*\* than waste my time with a Jew like Steinheim, who only brings shame on the rest of us Jews,” (Roth, p. 51). This outburst shows the deep affinity Alvin maintained with his own Jewish identity, and a protectiveness of what he believes it represents. Indeed, Alvin follows through, going “off to fight against the very worst human being ever born” (Roth, p. 52).

Alvin returns a broken man. Roth uses small clues to paint a realization of the apathy in society and himself – “the legmaker hadn't got the measurements right to begin with.” (Roth, p. 135) Philip notes that he is “resigned to dying.” (Roth, p. 141) After the scolding by Uncle Monty, Alvin “was too far gone to roar that day. Or even to crack.” (Roth, p. 152) Finding Sandy's collection of Lindbergh portraits was the final straw. Alvin succumbs and ends up with Shushy Margulis, the “Pinball King” - a racketeer.

On the surface, Alvin loses his will to live because of the shellshock, shame, and anger from his injury, but the root cause stems from something deeper - a profound societal axiom that Roth conveys with the arc of Alvin's life.

The opposite of love isn't hate. It's not racism, hate, or any profound emotion that grows with age and experience – it's apathy.

Every weekday this summer, I would take a trolley from the train station downtown to my workplace. One day, two evidently gay men boarded and sat next to an African American lady. Suddenly, the lady started a verbal altercation with these men, calling them “sinful” and informing

the rest of the trolley how they would “go to hell”. Visibly shaken, one of them exclaims, “Trump is president! We’re supposed to be on the same side!” And the lady mumbles, “you’ll never be on my side.”

Unfortunately, this story is an example of the hard reality of living in modern society. Alvin, these men on the trolley, all went through the same thought process: why am I fighting for people who do not care about me? Alvin’s protectiveness of his Jewish identity completely evaporates after the realization that “the first one to welcome him home at the train station had also been first to sign on with the fascists” (Roth, p. 146) - to the point of abandoning his family. In his mind, they don’t love or hate me, they just don’t care about me. Why should I care about them? I’ll just focus on myself from now on because nobody else is going to otherwise.

People get apathetic toward strangers as they grow older, because they learn to focus their love, time and energy towards those that care back. Why waste your limited allotment in life caring about those who don’t care about you? This is Roth’s larger message: humans tend toward apathy, and this indifference endangers the fundamental liberties of others we do not care about. When the fundamental liberties of one group are threatened, so are the fundamental liberties of all.